

# Storyboard-30

Paul was surprised the door opened when he tried it. He wasn't sure if it was because it hadn't been locked in the rush to deal with reforging Excalibur and all the comings and going from the house. Or if Donal had something magical that let friends in while stopping enemies, then raised the question of how quickly the squirrel put someone on that kind of friends' list.

The living room was a mess, as was the kitchen. Paul attempted some tidying, but his heart wasn't in it. He didn't know where it was, or if he should go looking for it. Numbness was comforting.

He had outrun the bile, but not his disgust. That had fizzled away when he couldn't run anymore and had to slow to a walk, and the numbness settled in. He didn't know how long he wandered, or what time it was when he found himself at Donal's house. The only place he had even passing familiarity in Denver, not that he'd expected to be able to find it if asked.

Now, he felt lost in the few rooms there, among the clutter. He found a bedroom mostly cleared of boxes and sat on the bed. He had planned to think through the problem of who had been turned into. There was a solution to it, there were always solutions to problems.

Instead, he stared at his feet, mind blank, for a long time. It would have been longer, but he was interrupted when the bed shook from someone sitting on the end of it.

It took too long for his brain to engage, and then he was looking at Thomas, looking back at him, concerned. How was he supposed to tell the rat his best friend was now a rapist? At least Thomas was dressed and didn't move closer.

"Yahui's okay," Thomas said, and again, it took too long for Paul to work out what that meant.

It meant talk was on the agenda, and not him. He figured that was a good thing.

"How is his family taking what happened? What he—" the words caught as Paul saw himself forcing his will on the doberman, instead of what the red panda had done in his grief. "—did?"

"They're still in shock over Yating's death. And a lot of the time's been spent convincing him not to run off to die taking the chamber down. Roland's still with them, Niel too. He was the first one I moved when duty called again."

"Suck being the one of only two—" Paul swallowed, the image of the badger's melting face coming to him. "The last one left."

Thomas nodded, tried to speak, failed. Took a breath and said. "I had to bring an Orr from San Francisco to here."

Oh, God.

Paul fought the bile down again.

“Are you okay?” Thomas asked.

Paul shook his head. “I’m—” the bile threatened to rise again, and he swallowed. “I don’t know what to do. What to think. I did—Fuck,” Paul snapped. “I can’t even say it! I did it and too much of a fucking coward to—” he stared at Thomas, who still had his mouth opened after saying something while he raged. Paul thought he’d heard, but it hadn’t made sense.

“Well, I think technically, I’m going to be a mother.” The rat grinned. “Sorry for the suddenness of the announcement, but you sounded like you were about to get hysterical, and I figured that was a good way to pull you away from that ledge.”

Paul sat back down. “Okay, I’m definitely not hysterical anymore. But what do you mean, a mother?” He looked his best friend over. “You aren’t getting a sex change, are you? I mean, can you even, with who our god is?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t have to. The Chike have a phrase, well, a series of them, that allows a guy to be impregnated and carry the baby to terms. Chima’s the first to be conceived that way.”

Paul tried to understand. The hyena often talked about his fathers, but that wasn’t uncommon within the Society for men to use a surrogate to have a son, and for her to never be involved after that.

“Chima never said anything about that.”

“He didn’t know until recently. Only his fathers and the few men who assisted did. You’re going to hear about it, eventually. They kept it to themselves only because they didn’t want others to use the method and then, decades down the line, find out it caused a problem. Chima’s thirty now, so they decided it’s been long enough.”

“Your sister suspected you were thinking about a kid, but I doubt she’d have ever thought about that.” Paul chuckled.

“Well, even before this being Society thing happened, I never thought about sex with a woman, and I wouldn’t ask some guy to go through with that for me. So I’ll be the one carrying my son.”

“And you who said he didn’t want to ever deal with a kid.”

“Things change.” Thomas paused. “People change.”

“I—” Paul said defensively.

“Madoc’s changing his last name.”

“What? Please stop, I’m going to get whiplash.” Paul ran a hand over his face. “Okay, I was about to freak out again, but it’s not the same, Thomas.”

“It’s never the same, Paul. I’m not trying to equate what you’re going through with what others are. I’m just saying we all change. Sometimes we make the decision, like Madoc taking on the last name Hertz, just like Trevor did. He figured that was going to send the message he wanted nothing to do with Raphael anymore. Victor is talking about allowing his sons to be initiated. He’s been talking with fathers within the Society, and while I don’t think anyone will ever convince him to go through with it after what Raphael had done to him, he is accepting that wasn’t typical.”

Thomas smiled. “And I’m done running. I’m done letting Raphael keep me from

having the life I want. I've had fun with this, working with Grant, helping people, teleporting all over the world, but the real reason was always that it let me run away. I can't keep doing that with a son, so once we're done with this craziness the Chamber's trying to pull, I'm going to look for the right guy to be my son's father, find a nice place to settle down, and only use my power if I feel it's important. It's not like I need a job anymore."

Thomas burst out laughing and Paul stared.

"I just realized that all that worrying about what my major was going to be, about settling for a liberal arts degree, and in the end, I'm a glorified Share Ride. My dad is going to be so infuriated when I tell him that."

"I think you might have exceeded whatever expectations he had for you. You are the most successful person I've ever known about."

"The advantage of being the only one who can fill this niche."

Paul nodded, and in the silence, his worries resurfaced. "I appreciate what you're doing, but this isn't the same."

"You aren't a monster, Paul." Thomas turned, so he faced him and crossed his legs on the bed.

"What I—"

"Stop."

"Thomas," Paul pleaded, "I—"

"Saved a man's life. That raccoon, Raoul?"

Paul nodded, then looked away, only seeing that doberman on the floor of the interrogation room. There because of what Paul had done to him.

"From what I'm told, the guy was attacking you while you were charging a sigil. You beat him down, and in the process, you turned him on. It isn't like you planned on doing it."

"It doesn't change what I did, Thomas."

"No, but it changes what you think of yourself because of it. Or it should if you weren't so off-kilter about it. You defended yourself and someone in need of help. You didn't even know you could do it, so you have to cut yourself some slack. I'm sure that once they help you control it, you won't just go around turning every guy you walk by into some sex-starved slave."

"Have you met my cousins?"

"Yes, and I don't like them, but you aren't them. You just share genes and power. You know better than me that genes don't define who you are."

Paul did his best to take in the words, to get his rational side to have more influence, as Thomas saddled in closer.

The rat rested his head on Paul's shoulder. "Didn't you tell me that the simple fact that you can question if you'll be a monster or not means that you won't turn into one?"

"That's about insanity, dumbass." Paul chuckled. "And it's popular knowledge, so it's not exactly proven."

"How about this, then? Anytime you question the kind of man you are turning into, I'll teleport over and smack you upside the head."

Paul smiled. "Deal." He sighed contentedly, placing an arm around his best friend.

“Thanks for this.”

“Snuggling?”

“The reality check.”

“I never thought you, of all people, would need one.”

“It’s been a lot recently, still is.”

Thomas nodded. “What you’re feeling isn’t fixed just because we talked, but anytime you need to talk, you have me and a lot of other guys there to help.” The rat squeezed Paul. “Remember that.”

“I will.” The quiet was comfortable, just to two of them. “So who are—”

Someone knocked on the door, and it opened as Dietrich entered.

“Of course, they’d send you,” Paul sighed in annoyance.

“In his eternal wisdom,” the massive tiger said with disdain, “Arnold decided it was my job to clean up after my son.” He raised a hand and Paul swallowed his protest. “I’m not mad at you. You didn’t know what you could do or how to make it happen. It’s my nephew who shouldn’t have let you get out there, mixed up in this mess.”

“I wasn’t going to let my friends deal with that on their own.” Paul tried to stand, to confront his father, but Thomas held him down.

“Then Arnold shouldn’t have let you go without at least teaching you the basics of what our influence is.”

“I didn’t know I could do that. How was he supposed to?” Paul tried to get out of Thomas’s hold, but the rat was insistent.

“It’s the fucking job of the guy in charge to think of the stuff the rest of us don’t.”

“Thomas, Let go of me.” Paul looked at his best friend, who was smiling at him.

“Not yet.” Thomas kissed him as Paul opened his mouth, pushing him back. Paul tried to push him off as the rat straddled him. What was wrong with Thomas? This wasn’t the time, certainly not with an Orr present who might think this was an invitation to force himself onto—

Oh dear God no.

Paul heaved Thomas off him and scrambled to the other side of the room. “Thomas, where’s your amulet?”

“I returned it since you have your power under control now.” The rat crawled on the bed, grinning. “Come on, Paul, it’s been a while. My ass has missed your cock.”

“Thomas, that’s not you talking. It’s me, I’m doing this to you. Fuck, I thought I was done with that!”

Dietrich sighed heavily. “You’re going to want to leave us alone.”

Paul protested, but Thomas wasn’t looking at him anymore, but at the other tiger in the room, and it wasn’t playfulness on his face anymore, but naked need. Dietrich undid his shirt.

“Unless you plan on joining in,” his father said, “which you wouldn’t need me to step in again if you did, Paul. Leave.”

Paul wanted to protest, but wasn’t it too late already? Hadn’t Denton said that once a man was influenced, an Orr had to fuck him? Shouldn’t that be him? Instead of someone

Thomas didn't know? Paul was his best friend. It would be better if—

Paul was out of the room, heaving, trying not to throw up. He couldn't force himself on Thomas that way. He was down the stair when he heard the need in his best friend's voice and his mind filled in the images of Dietrich using him. He was out of the house and hurrying to put as much distance between him and what was happening.

Fuck. Why? Why was this thing back again? What was he going to do now? Where could he go?

He called his contact at Royal.

"Mister Herran," Ernest answered, "How can I help you?"

"I can't be around anyone."

"That doesn't sound correct."

"My ability turned itself on again, anyone I find even slightly attractive is going to turn into a sex maniac."

"I believe you are exaggerating."

"I'm freaking out, okay?" He yelled, and the people around him gave him space. "I thought that was dealt with. That this worked like the others now, but it means I can't go back to Steel Link. I definitely can't be around my friends. If you need to know anything about what's going on, you'll have to call Joseph. He's going to be in charge."

"Very well."

"I expected some level of push back," Paul protested.

He chuckled as soft and short. "That isn't what my duties are. If you feel your best course of action is to distance yourself from others, then I will assist with that. Do you need me to make arrangements for a hotel room for you to stay in while this is resolved?"

"Ye—No."

"That sounds like a contradiction."

"Look, I'm going to head home."

"I can make arrangements for a flight back to San Francisco."

"No, not that home. I mean home, home. I'm going back to Minneapolis."

"Very well, I will have the flight information—"

"I'm not flying. Can you imagine the mess it'll be if I find even one guy attracting in there?"

"I see. I'm afraid that Adam left strict instructions if you were to ask for a car."

"That's fine. I'm in no state to drive."

"Hopefully, you aren't considering walking there."

Paul watched the bus drive by. It wasn't like there would be a lot of people on it, a lot of socializing. He could keep his head down and not pay attention to anyone. And if it looked like he was affecting someone, he could hurry off the bus. He couldn't get out of a plane if things happened.

"Can you direct me to the bus terminal?"

"I can." There was a brief pause. "And I will ensure there is someone there to escort you."

“Didn’t you listen to me? I can’t be around any of the men from Steel Link or Royal Security.”

“I do not believe that will be a problem,” Ernest replied, then disconnected, leaving Paul staring at his phone as the bus terminal’s address appeared on the display.